

References—

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W. C. OSMAN HILL, M.D., F.Z.S., etc.
AND
YVONNE BURN, F.Z.S.

COLOMBO,
July 16, 1944.

16.—WILD BIRDS AND THEIR CAPTIVE YOUNG.

Do parent birds poison their captive chicks? Common folk in some parts of Bengal believe that they do. A similar belief seems to prevail in the English countryside as E. D. Cumming suggests in his *Idlings in Arcadia*. He writes (p. 219), 'I once found a young blackbird ready to fly—his nestmates had flown—held fast by a strong thread of grass which by some means had laid firm hold of his foot; luckily for him it was too short to let him climb over the edge of the nest, but he must have starved—some people say been poisoned by the parents—had he not been rescued in time.' Douglas Dewar (*Birds at the Nest*, chap. v) cites many instances of young birds being left to their fate or evicted from the nest by their unfeeling parents. A few cases of young birds being done to death by one of the parents are also quoted by him as evidence of lack of parental affection. But Dewar's culprits all nested in aviaries and their method of infanticide lacked the refinement of practised poisoners. Dewar however illustrates the attitude of wild parents towards caged offspring in chapter vi of the book mentioned above. In the third week of May 1907, he placed three young sparrows in a cage. 'The parents fed all three, both bringing food until June 6th, when the hen ceased to do so apparently having gone to nest again. The cock sparrow continued to feed the young until June 26th.' This is obviously a case of simple desertion, but not of poisoning.

A case that smacks of Borgian methods is therefore well worth recording.

A friend of mine once removed four fledgelings of a Grey-headed Myna (*Sturnia malabarica*) from the nest hole. Not knowing how to feed them, he decided to leave the task to the parents and placed the cage at a place where they could not help noticing it. For the first two weeks things went satisfactorily, but an old peasant who saw the birds feed the captive chicks, shook his head doubtfully. They will poison the young ones, he confidently remarked and before long his prophecy came true. After three weeks or so the old birds began to bring lizards and other vermin, which if they were not actually poisonous were doubtless unwholesome as food and three of the chicks quickly expired. The fourth and last was then let loose but too late to be saved. I do not know whether it was a case of deliberate poisoning. The Grey-headed Myna cannot be expected to reason cogently and plan the death of their young ones to escape the labour of feeding them for an indefinite period. Dewar's sparrows simply shirked their duty and left the chicks. Did the Grey-headed Myna grow more

careless about the choice of food as the parental instinct grew less urgent when the breeding season was nearing its close? In any case the popular belief is probably not entirely unfounded, and even if deliberate poisoning is ruled out as impossible, it is not unlikely that unwholesome food administered by parent birds sometimes expedites the end of captive chicks.

IMPERIAL RECORDS DEPT.
NEW DELHI,
September 19, 1944.

S. N. SEN.

[It seems more likely that the chicks died of under feeding than through any 'unwholesomeness' of the food. Young birds have enormous appetites and it is reasonable to suppose that the parents were unable to satiate the caged chicks on account of their confinement. Eds.]

17.—THE BIRDS OF MYSORE.

In the 1943 December issue, *Scolopax rusticola*, the Woodcock, is described as a rare winter visitor. As to its being a winter visitor, yes, but personally, I should not call it rare, but then I may have been fortunate in my locality.

My estate is 3,600 ft. above sea level situated on the inner slopes of the Western Ghats, and during the last 20 years it is seldom that I have been unable to flush a cock between January and the full moon of April, from the cardamom ravines and small streams of the estate and the neighbouring jungle.

My observations go to show that they come in with the full moon of December and go out with that of April, there are certain favourite lies where I can invariably flush one, and not infrequently they are in pairs.

I have shot three in a morning, and I find that the weight is as a rule 21 oz, a good dog is most necessary as they sit very tight and once flushed are great runners.

A bird I have not seen mentioned is the 'Malay Bittern' *Gorsachius melanolophus*, the first one I saw and shot was in 1904, and at that time the Society did not possess a specimen, since then I have seen quite a few mainly in the bamboo jungle of the Bhadra Valley.

JAVALI P.O.,
MYSORE STATE,
July 14th, 1944.

R. G. FOSTER.

18.—ADDITIONS TO THE BIRDS OF BOMBAY AND SALSETTE AND NEIGHBOURHOOD.

The Large Gray Babbler : *Argya malcolmi* (Sykes).

A solitary bird was seen on top of Trombay Hill on 2nd August 1942—an obvious straggler. It is common in the Deccan though it has not been observed near Khandala.